



Slow Fade to Afro: The Black Presence in Brazilian Cinema

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While this yardstick may contain some subjective elements, it is possible to measure Katz, Sadoul, and Spottiswoode by their priorities and objectives. None of them seem quite so obsessive as the *Oxford Companion*. Katz and Sadoul eliminated illustrations as a luxury. Spottiswoode has numerous technical drawings, but in his case they are very necessary. Katz has no individual entries for motion pictures. He is content in describing major films as appropriate in his entries covering filmmakers, performers, or producers. Most significantly, Katz and Sadoul were willing to forego being everything to everyone. They were able to determine more and less impor-

tant figures, films, and processes in motion picture history. Generally with minimal personal bias, they were able to weight their entries in a helpful way. In spite of some factual errors, these three are valuable. True, it is a qualified recommendation that cautions one is treading in dangerous waters, where danger can still surface. But at least in these cases the risks are minimal.

Under the circumstances, then, I suggest that a new generation of motion picture reference works need to be prepared. Until they are available, great care must be exercised in approaching the materials presently available for the study of the motion picture.

ROBERT STAM

Slow Fade to Afro: The Black Presence in Brazilian Cinema

North American movie-goers who have seen some of the recent films arriving from Brazil—*Amulet of Ogum*, *Tent of Miracles*, *Pixote*, *Bye Bye Brazil*, *Gaijin*, *Xica da Silva*—cannot but be struck by a racial tableau which is at once comfortably familiar and disconcertingly original. They have experienced the cultural products of a multi-ethnic society in many ways similar to our own, with substantial black, Indian, Japanese, German, Italian and Jewish communities. They have seen films marked by a strong black presence, from a country which includes the largest nation of African descent within the black diaspora. They have seen a wide variety of black roles: Pai Erlei, the *umbanda* priest of *Amulet*; Pedro Arcanjo, the culture-hero of *Tent of Miracles*; Dito, the sensitive delinquent of *Pixote*; Andorinha, the mute muscleman of *Bye Bye Brazil*; and Xica, the ex-slave turned power-behind-the-throne in *Xica da Silva*. My purpose here will be to sketch out the origins and background of this black presence, reflect on some of the issues raised by that presence, and draw some tentative conclusions within a cross-cultural perspective.¹

Although blacks came into prominence in Brazilian cinema only in the sixties and seventies, they have never been entirely absent from Brazilian screens. The many films documenting Rio's carnival, beginning in 1901, inevitably featured the Afro-Brazilians who then formed a majority of Rio's population. The first black actor known to have performed in a fiction film was the circus clown Benjamin de Oliveira, who appeared as the Indian Peri in Antonio Leal's *Os Guaranis* (1907), an adaptation of an Indianist novel by José de Alencar. Real-life events also generated black screen appearances. The historical episode known as the "Revolta da Chibata" (the whip revolt) in which the black sailor João Candido led a revolt against corporal punishment in the Brazilian Navy, inspired both documentaries (*Revolta no Rio*, Revolt in Rio, 1910), and staged reconstructions like Lambertini's *A Vida do Cabo João Candido* (The Life of Commander João Candido, 1910)—the first Brazilian film to receive the ambiguous compliment of official censorship.

Generally, however, despite a high proportion of black and mulatto citizens, Afro-Bra-

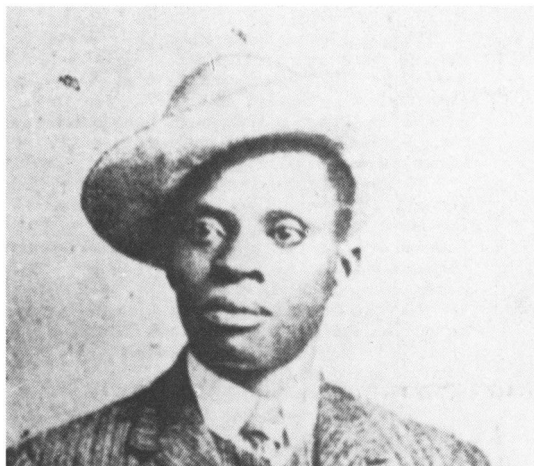


Zézé Motta as Xica da Silva

zilians did not feature prominently in the symbolically “white” cinema of the first few decades of this century. A number of factors account for this “structuring absence.” Since the beginnings of Brazilian cinema coincided with the height of European imperialism, and since world cinema was dominated by the colonial powers, the tendency was to project a vision of Brazil as merely a tropical appendage of European civilization in which non-Europeans had very little role. The turn of the century also saw the propagation of social Darwinist ideologies of the kind lampooned in Dos Santos’s *Tent of Miracles*: the black element, it was thought, contributed to Brazil’s racial “degeneracy.” Although no film of the first decades explicitly advances such an ideology—there is no Brazilian *Birth of a Nation*—one is struck by the frequent adaptations of Indianist novels in contrast with the general slighting of Afro-Brazilian themes. The celebration of the Indian as “brave warrior,” the spiritual source and symbol of Brazil’s nationhood, involved an element of bad faith toward both

Indian and black. The exaltation of the disappearing Indian was dedicated to the very group being victimized by literal and cultural genocide. This ambiguous “compliment” was also a means of avoiding the vexed question of slavery. The proud history of black rebellions was ignored; the brave Indian, it was subtly insinuated, resisted slavery while blacks did not. The white literary and film-making elite, in sum, chose the safely distant and mythically connoted Indian over the more problematically present black, victim of a slavery abolished just ten years before Segreto filmed the first Brazilian “views” in 1898.

Much of the early film production, furthermore, was the work of Italian immigrants like Segreto. And while these immigrants bore no responsibility for the institution of slavery and were often themselves the objects of exploitation—a situation clearly registered in Tizuka Yamasaki’s *Gaijin*—collectively they were the winners, and blacks the losers, of this period of Brazilian history. Immigrant film-makers



Benjamin de Oliveira

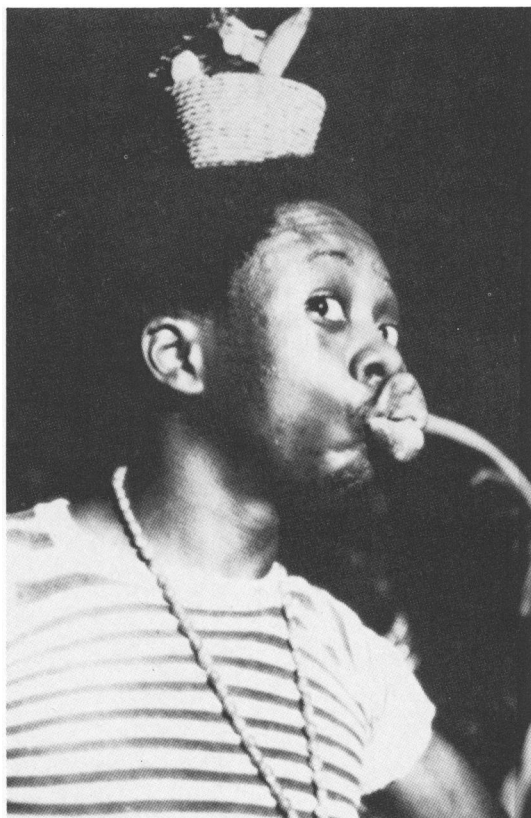
were obviously not eager to filmically explore the oppressive situation of the very group that they themselves had economically displaced. A rare apparent exception to this rule is Antonio Marques Filho's 1929 adaptation of Bernardo Guimarães's sentimental abolitionist novel *A Escrava Isaura* (1875). The implicitly racist novel regards Isaura's enslavement as uniquely tragic because of her "ivory" skin, and the film perpetuates this vision by having the white actress Elisa Betty play the title role, much as American films like *Pinky* cast white actresses as "tragic mulattoes."

In the thirties, the situation of blacks improved somewhat as immigration declined and ideological winds shifted. The Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre, a student of the anti-racist Franz Boas, formulated the theory of "racial democracy." Although now seen as sentimental and colonialist, an exemplum of the "ideology of whitening," Freyre's work constituted a progressive step at the time by emphasizing the positive contribution of blacks to Brazil's cultural mix. And if Brazilian cinema of the silent era was symbolically "white," the cinema of the ensuing decades might be called "mulatto." Blacks became a significant presence with the *chanchadas*—Rio-based comedies featuring musical numbers and carnivalesque themes—which dominated production from the mid-thirties through the late fifties. Partially modelled on American musicals, the *chanchadas* featured blacks and mulattoes in minor or background roles, while generally fostering an ideal of whiteness reminiscent of Busby Berkeley or Esther Williams

musicals. Despite occasional exceptions—Mauro's *Favela dos Meus Amores* (Favela of My Loves, 1935) features the musicians of the Portela Samba School—most *chanchadas* use blacks as background and foil for the love intrigues of white stars like Eliane Macedo and Cyl Farney. Although samba was largely an Afro-Brazilian contribution, the product of the primarily black *morros* (hills) of Rio, film after film gave the impression that samba was a white cultural product.

An exception to this tendency, surprisingly, came from a North American director. In 1942 Orson Welles went to Brazil to film two episodes of the never-to-be-finished *It's All True*, a semi-documentary aimed at fostering the Good Neighbor policy and countering Nazi propaganda in Latin America. Welles, a jazz-lover who had produced an all-black *Macbeth* for the Federal Theatre, was introduced to the *favelas* and to the samba by Vinicius de Moraes, a poet and film critic later to become famous as a composer-singer and the author of the source play for *Black Orpheus*. Welles became a samba and carnival enthusiast and organized the Rio episodes around two central characters, a five-year old boy and a samba school leader desperate over the destruction of Praça Onze, the Rio square through which the samba of the *morros* traditionally entered the city.

It's All True was to feature the brilliant black actor Sebastião Prata (Grande Otelo), whom Welles reportedly characterized as one of the finest comic actors of the twentieth century. Grande Otelo has acted in over a hundred feature films—from Burle's *Moleque Tião* (1943) to Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982)—and has figured prominently in all the crucial phases of Brazilian cinema since the forties. He was inspired to work in film by the presence of a black boy (Farina) in the American "Our Gang" series; Otelo wanted to be the black boy in a Brazilian equivalent series. Paired at first with the white actor Oscarito and later with Ankito, Otelo became the "king of the *chanchadas*." Unlike the servant-master pattern that prevailed in the black-white friendships in Hollywood films of the same period, there was a rough equality between Otelo and his white co-stars. Otelo's persona was invariably sympathetic; he often played the *malandro*, the urban survivor who got by thanks to



Grande Otelo in *IT'S ALL TRUE*

a glib tongue and a quick imagination. He was treated, however, as comically asexual; the love intrigues were left to his white partners.

Grande Otelo's roles have been extremely diverse. In 1949 he played in the first Brazilian film to confront the problem of *contemporary* racial discrimination: José Carlos Burle's *Tambem Somos Irmãos* (We Too are Brothers). The film, of which, unfortunately, no copy survives, was a Brazilian example of the "problem film" genre then popular in Hollywood. The story, according to the director's account of it, concerned a wealthy widower who adopts four children, of whom two are white and two are black, a situation which becomes the pretext for denouncing the discrimination to which black Brazilians are subjected. Otelo's other roles include the samba composer in *Rio Zona Norte*, the frustrated screenwriter in *Ladrões de Cinema* (Cinema Thieves), and the carnivalesque astronaut launched from "Cape Carnival" in *Os Cosmonautas* (the Cosmonauts). In *As Aventuras de Robinson Crusoe* (The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe), he subverts Defoe's colonialist classic by play-



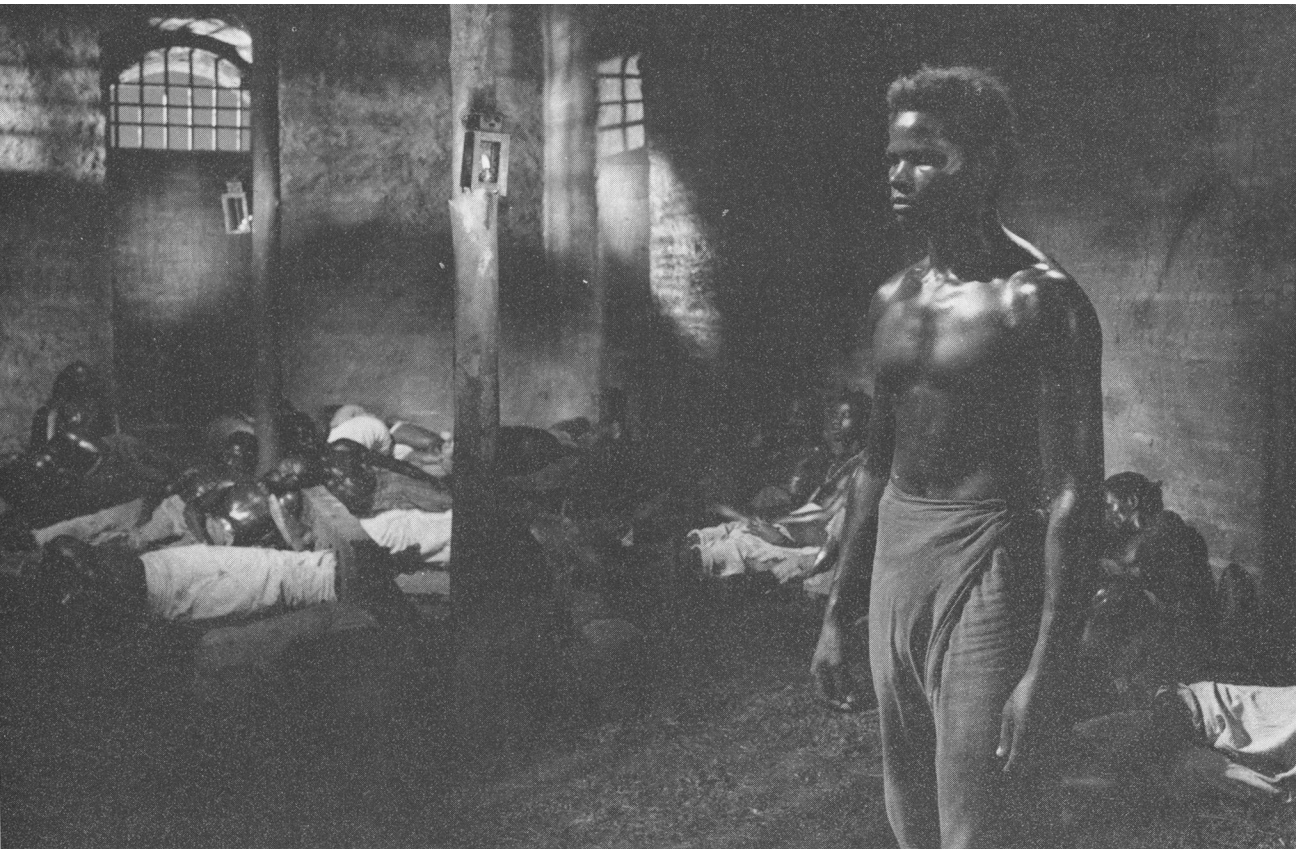
Eliane Macedo in *RIO FANTASIA*, a *chanchada*

ing a Friday who refuses to accept the colonizer's power to name, telling the Englishman: "Me Crusoe, you Friday!" His most internationally famous role, of course, was as the black lead in *Macunaíma*, where his comic gifts and box-office appeal helped guarantee the artistic and commercial success of the film.

In the late 1940's a group linked to São Paulo's industrial bourgeoisie, inspired by the commercial success of the *chanchada* but scorning what it saw as that genre's vulgarity, founded the Vera Cruz Film Company, modelled on the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios in Hollywood. Vera Cruz set up a luxurious system with contract stars and directors but without the economic infrastructure on which to base such a system. Vera Cruz was a kind of ephemeral fantasy of São Paulo capitalism enacted by English technicians, Italian directors, and right-wing Brazilian writers under the guidance of Brazilian-born but highly Europeanized Alberto Cavalcanti. There was little room in Vera Cruz's just-like-Europe classiness for black or mulatto faces. Apart

Grande Otelo in *AS AVENTURAS DE ROBINSON CRUSOE*





SINHÁ MOÇA

from the many films featuring black maids (usually played by Ruth de Souza), only one Vera Cruz film focussed on a black theme: *Sinhá Moça* (1953). A costume drama set around the time of Abolition, the film shows the institution of slavery in all its horror and provides glimpses of black anger and revolt. The revolt, interestingly, comes not from the blacks in the “big house”—who have to have the need for abolition explained to them by white abolitionists!—but from the field laborers from the *senzala* (slave quarters). Based on a novel by a Brazilian woman (Maria De- zonne Pacheco Fernandes), *Sinhá Moça* also suggests a parallel between the heroine’s personal revolt against what we now call patriarchy and the black and white abolitionist struggle against slavery. Unfortunately, the film systematically privileges its white stars Eliane Lage and Anselmo Duarte (as is obvious from a look at the publicity stills) and idealizes the abolitionist movement. Unlike the Cuban film *El Otro Francisco* (The Other Francisco), *Sinhá Moça* completely elides the economic forces and motivations shaping the abolitionist movement.

Oswaldo Censoni’s *João Negrinho* (1954) displays an even more paternalistic view of slavery and abolition. The narrative is embroidered around the flashback memories of João Negrinho, an elderly ex-slave. As a child, João is befriended by the slave-owner’s son Chiquinho; scenes of the pre-pubic boys fishing might remind a North American of Huck and Jim on their Mississippi raft. Chiquinho constantly protects and intercedes for a João Negrinho portrayed as but minimally competent and perpetually in need of dramatic rescue. A saintly priest, meanwhile, a tender-hearted nineteenth-century integrationist, counsels the two friends. He preaches universal love but practices a double standard which asks for “understanding” from Chiquinho but demands “obedience” from João Negrinho. While the film apparently presents all events from João’s point of view so as to enlist our complete sympathy, what the film enlists our sympathy *for* is in fact a racist vision. The final sequence of post-abolition camaraderie, intended as a celebration of the brave new world of “racial democracy,” inadvertently offers clues to the subsequent oppression of blacks in Brazil. A new generation, presum-

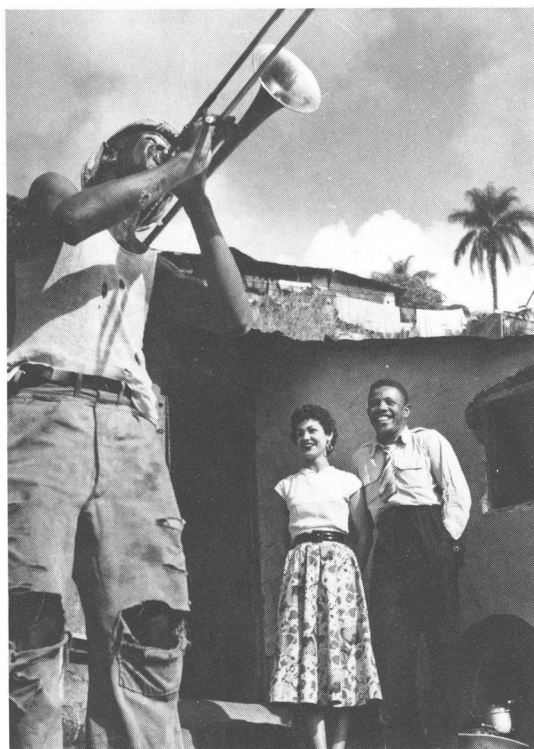


JOAO NEGRINHO

ably charitable and egalitarian, has taken over from racist slaveholders like Chico's father, but the final shot shows João driving two white friends from a celebratory banquet in a horse and carriage. Although metaphorically "in the driver's seat," in symbolic terms he has merely been promoted from slave to servant.²

The major exceptions to the paternalism of the fifties were Nelson Pereira dos Santos's *Rio 40 Graus* (Rio 40 Degrees, 1954) and *Rio Zona Norte* (1957). The former film treats a typical Sunday in the life of Rio de Janeiro

RIO 40 GRAUS



and "stars" the cariocas themselves. Nelson consistently highlights the blackness of Rio. The characters who provide the human and rhetorical "glue" linking the diverse episodes are the peanut vendors, largely black, who descend from the *favelas* and fan out across the city. Unlike the *chanchadas*, the film takes the existential dilemmas of its black characters seriously, according them the unpretentious sympathy and solidarity which is the hallmark of Nelson's work. *Rio Zona Norte*, meanwhile, focuses on the samba composer Espirito (Grande Otelo) and the economic exploitation of which he is the object. In both films, blacks form part of a multi-racial mass of oppressed Brazilians; racial categories are subsumed under social and economic ones.

In the wake of dos Santos's pioneering efforts, the Cinema Novo directors of the sixties searched out the dimly illuminated corners of Brazilian life—the *favela* and the *sertão*—and created what might be called a symbolically "black" cinema, in which black Brazilians had a crucial role. Triguinho Neto's *Bahia de Todos os Santos* paved the way with its unsentimental depiction of racial and social oppression in Bahia, the most Africanized metropolis in Brazil. The film's protagonist Tonio is the Brazilian character who most closely resembles the "tragic mulatto" figure familiar from American films and literature. He is the man in between, divided between black mother and white father, between *candomblé* and nightclub, between traditional community and urban individualism. No believer in "racial democracy," he tells a friend: "They say that everything is easy, that color doesn't matter, but it's just empty words." Tonio is also the reluctant sexual object of the

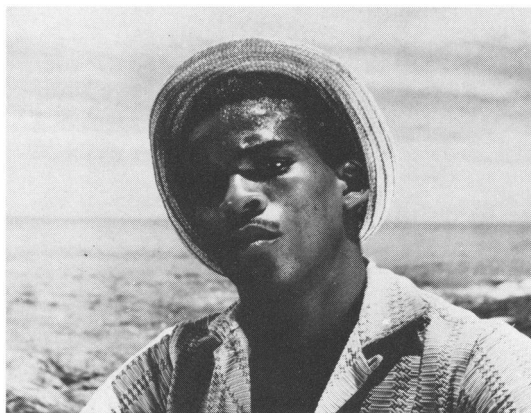
BAHIA DE TODOS SANTOS



Englishwoman Miss Collins, played by Vera Cruz veteran Lola Brah, a bit of casting whereby the film hints at an association between colonial exploitation and colonized cinema. An insistent homosexual subtext—the director abandoned film-making when Jurandir Pimental, his lover and the Tonio of the film, committed suicide shortly before the première—suggests a possible alliance between blacks and homosexuals as oppressed groups, unfortunately at the expense of women as objects of their mutual hostility.

Like *Bahia de Todos os Santos*, Duarte's *Pagador de Promessas* (The Given Word, 1962) and Rocha's *Barravento* (1962) form part of the "Bahian Renaissance," the cinematic rediscovery of the cultural riches of Salvador, Bahia. The former film centers on the vow of its protagonist, Zé-of-the-Donkey, to bring a cross to the Church of Saint Barbara in gratitude for the miraculous cure of his donkey. The priest refuses him entrance because the vow was proffered at a *candomblé* shrine. The film then pits *candomblé* priestess against Catholic priest and *berimbau* against church bell, as the people of Bahia, largely black and mulatto, support Zé's right to enter the Church. Anti-clerical rather than anti-Christian, Duarte contrasts the sincere Christ-like faith of Zé with the ossified Christianity of the priest. The practitioners of *candomblé*, meanwhile, are shown as sympathetic but misguided, and Duarte underlines Zé's separation from *candomblé* by having him refuse repeated invitations to visit the *terreiro*. The film evokes a kind of revolution by having the people take over an institution, yet the "revolution" consists, ultimately, only in gaining entrance to a more ecumenically tolerant Catholic Church.³

O PAGADOR DE PROMESSAS: Zé's initial vow



Firmino (Antonio Pitango) in BARRAVENTO

If *The Given Word* implicitly condemns *candomblé* from the point of view of ecumenical Catholicism, *Barravento* would seem to critique Afro-Brazilian religion from the standpoint of historical materialism. The film shows the oppression inflicted on poor black fishermen and apparently denounces the role of *candomblé* in legitimating this oppression. The protagonist Firmino, back from the city, tells his brothers and sisters to forsake religion to fight oppression. But the surface condemnation of *candomblé* is contradicted by three of the film's deep structural features: (1) the poetic celebration, affectionate and exalted, of the sensuous *mise-en-scène* of *candomblé*; (2) the insistence, through costume, gesture, and montage, on Firmino's isolation from his fellow villagers; and (3) the crucial ambiguity, pointed out by Ismail Xavier, in the film's system of explanation: all the narrative events can be explained either in a materialist manner or as evidence of the truth and efficacy of Afro-Brazilian religion.⁴

Carlos Diegues's *Ganga Zumba* (1963) memorializes the seventeenth-century fugitive slave republic called Palmares, a republic which lasted almost a century in the face of repeated assaults from both the Dutch and the Portuguese. Based on João Felício dos Santos's novel of the same name, the film focuses on a fugitive black slave whose odyssey leads him to Palmares. A Fanonian ode to black liberation, the film assumes a black perspective throughout. It shows blacks not as mere victims but as active agents who take their destiny in their own hands. While the colonized Brazil of the coast was impoverished and politically repressed, blacks were constructing a



GANGA ZUMBA: slave slays master

communitarian republic in the mountains of the interior. (Diegues is currently planning to further explore the implications of this seventeenth-century “utopia” in a remake of *Ganga Zumba*, based on more recent historical research by Decio Freitas, to be entitled simply *Palmares*.)

In the second phase of Cinema Novo, extending roughly from 1964 through the coup-within-the-coup of December 1968, film-makers turned away from *favela* and *sertão* to

examine themselves and the failure of the project of the populist left. Since the film-makers were generally white middle-class intellectuals, blacks and mulattoes tend not to be a strong presence in the films of this period. (The exception that proves the rule is the character Calunga (Pitanga) the imaginative *malandro* of Carlos Diegues’ *Grande Cidade* (The Big City, 1965), but even he can be seen as a *magister ludi* figure who stands in for the director himself). It is only with the third “tropicalist” phase that black characters and themes reappear in force. Joaquin Pedro de Andrade’s *Macunaíma* (1969), based on the novel by the mulatto writer Mario de Andrade, highlights blackness as one of the essential threads in the Brazilian racial fabric. Two sequences in which the black Macunaíma (Grande Otelo) turns white, occasionally misread as racist by North American audiences, are in fact satirical barbs directed at the “ideology of whitening” and at the “economic miracle.”’ The film lampoons racist attitudes. Explaining why black Jigue was arrested rather than himself, his white brother Manaape cites the popular maxim: “A white man running is a champion; a black man running is

GRANDE OTELO in MACUNAÍMA



a thief.” In another tropicalist film, Rocha’s *Antonio das Mortes* (1969), meanwhile, the character “nego Antão” (black Antão) encapsulates Afro-Brazil as he moves from colonized passivity to armed revolt, ultimately becoming the “holy warrior” who slays the reactionary landowner, “the dragon of evil.”

One film, Antunes Filho’s *Compasso de Espera* (Marking Time, released 1973), had the courage to inventory the racist features of Brazilian society. *Compasso* focuses on Jorge de Oliveira (Zozimo Bulbul), a black poet and advertising agent. Romantically involved with an older white woman, Jorge publishes books of poetry with the help of a childless white millionaire who spiritually adopts him and becomes his artistic sponsor. The impeccably dressed, dignified, articulate Jorge at first glance resembles a number of Sidney Poitier characters, but he lacks the moral stature of the Poitier persona. Successful but dependent on white benevolence, he is internally rent by the contradictory roles he is called upon to play. A partisan of Martin Luther King-style non-violence, Jorge is pressured from the left by his militant separatist friend Assis (Pitanga). (Indeed, their discussions of alternative strategies for black liberation could as well take place in New York as in São Paulo; perhaps the achievement of the film is to show that the two realities are not so far apart.) To Assis’s “Burn Baby Burn” Jorge answers, in English, “Build Baby Build!” When Jorge becomes infatuated with Cristina, a young white daughter of the São Paulo bourgeoisie, he becomes the object of racist slurs first from her family and then from a band of rednecks who seem more imported from the Hollywood south than authentic in Brazilian terms. In any case, Jorge’s attempt to be at once distinguished author, defender of black rights, devoted family member, and faithful lover to two white women ultimately exacts a terrible toll in fatigue and existential confusion.

Compasso exposes the myriad forms of racism, from gestures of condescension to acts of discrimination and even physical violence. Jorge cites Millôr Fernandes’s ironic dictum that “there is no racism in Brazil because black people know their place.” Antunes mocks a compendium of racist clichés: that the problem isn’t racial but social; that Pelé’s success proves the absence of discrimination;



COMPASSO DE ESPERA

that good blacks have “white souls.” In his advertising work, Jorge is virtually obliged to design ads that idealize whiteness (a real tendency easily confirmed by a quick perusal of Brazilian magazines). Even the “charity” of Jorge’s *padrinho*-protector goes back to the period of slavery, when the frequency of white-black sexual involvement led well-off whites to adopt and protect their “illegitimate” offspring.

Compasso was rightly criticized for focusing on a highly unrepresentative character, a kind of Brazilian equivalent to American television’s *Julia*. Living in a luxurious apartment, constantly sipping whiskey at cocktail parties, Jorge represents an infinitesimal minority of black Brazilians. Jorge is less representative of blacks than of the anguished artist-intellectuals of a particularly repressive period in Brazilian history. Antunes turns Jorge into an exemplar of the intellectuals’ passivity and frustration. Stylistically, *Compasso* is a highly colonized film. The parties recall *La Dolce Vita*; the lighting recalls *film noir*; the hortatory tone recalls Stanley Kramer. In short, the film was made as if all the decolonizing achievements of Cinema Novo had been for nought. The sound track mixes abstract percussion, Erik Satie and Blood Sweat and Tears, completely ignoring the black musical presence in São Paulo, with its samba schools and avant-garde performers. In short, the film never intimates the existence of a cultural alternative to the alienated white world in which Jorge is immersed. Naively integrationist, the film pleads for “tolerance”; it lacks any deeper social, economic, political or cultural analysis. And it never suggests the possibility of characters such as Jorge uniting with other blacks and mulattoes and progressive whites in a move-

ment which would radically restructure Brazilian society.

The films of the seventies are remarkable for the range and variety of black roles. Rocha's *Der Leone Have Sept Cabeças* (The Lions Have Seven Heads, 1970) animates allegorical figures representing the colonizer and colonized in conflict in the Third World. The black characters include Zumbi (named after the founder of Palmares), the symbol of the African revolution and the black diaspora, Samba, the symbol of Afro culture, and Xobu, the corrupt colonized puppet. Other black characters of the seventies include the black *cangaceiro* of *Faustão* (1975); the powerful ex-slave who dominates eighteenth-century Minas Gerais in *Xica da Silva* (1976); the black favelado film-makers of *Ladrões de Cinema* (Cinema Thieves, 1977); the black intellectual and culture-hero Pedro Arcanjo in *Tent of Miracles* (1977); and the Bahian in love with American detective films—to the point of wearing a trench coat in the tropics—in *J. S. Brown O Último Heroi* (J. S. Brown, The Last Hero, 1979).



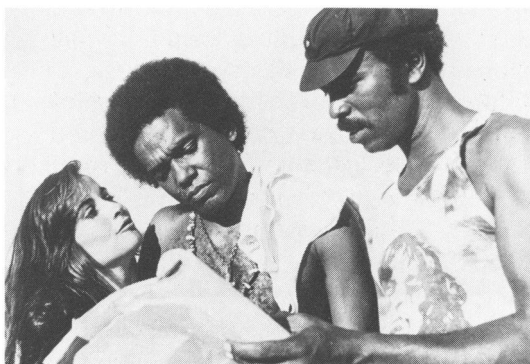
CINEMA THIEVES

The seventies film which most outrageously confounds all stereotypes is Antonio Carlos Fontoura's *Rainha Diaba* (Devil Queen, 1975). The title character, played with forceful brilliance by Milton Gonçalves (the Jigue from *Macunaíma*), is a black drag queen and underworld chieftain. (The character's real-life prototype, a black transvestite hoodlum known as Madame Satan, wielded power in Rio's notorious Lapa District.) *Rainha Diaba* makes surprisingly little of the blackness of its protagonist. When some hoodlums revolt against his rule, it is because they refuse to be bossed by a drag queen, not because he is black.

Devil Queen himself is a veritable palimpsest of supposedly irreconcilable figures—eminently black, eminently gay, and eminently macho boss. The legend on his T-shirt—“Freak!”—evokes his constituency, the community of the marginalized, all those that society turns into freaks.

The seventies also marked the emergence of the first socially significant black directors. In the fifties, Haroldo Costa, a black impresario from Rio, had directed a sophisticated film (*Um Desconhecido Bate à Porta*, A Stranger Knocks at the Door, 1958) set in a white upper-class milieu, but it was only in the seventies that certain black directors, generally the spiritual sons of Cinema Novo, made films touching on black themes. Waldyr Onofre's *Aventuras Amorosas de um Padeiro* (Amorous Adventures of a Baker, 1975) animates a gallery of characters typical of Rio's Northern Zone, and largely succeeds in the director's professed goal of treating black characters simply as ordinary people. The most interesting character is Saul, a poet-sculptor-actor-lover, who complains that “they'll never let a black man play Hamlet, I'll have to spend my life playing Othello.” Apart from a punning reference to *Grande Otelo*, his complaint doubtless reflects the black artist-intellectual's frustration at the restricted opportunities open to him. Other black-directed films include Odilon Lopes's *Um é Pouco, Dois é Bom* (One is Little, Two is Fine, 1977) and the Nigerian director Ola Balogun's *A Deusa Negra* (The Black Goddess, 1978), the first Brazilian-Nigerian co-production. A *Roots* in reverse, the film concerns a Nigerian who goes to Brazil to look for his relatives.

Waldyr Onofre (right) directing *AVENTURAS AMOROSAS DE UM PADEIRO*



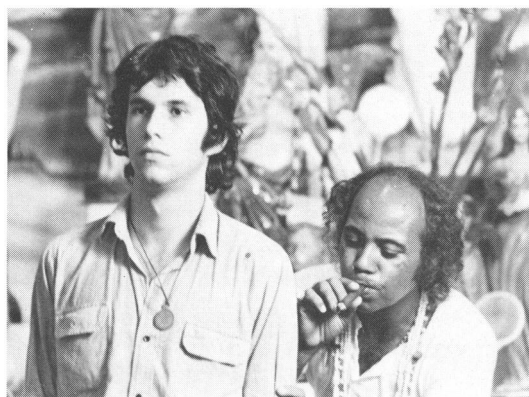


Antonio and Teresina in Pitanga's *IN THE WORLD'S MOUTH*

Of all the films by black directors, Antonio Pitanga's *Na Boca do Mundo* (In the World's Mouth, 1977) is perhaps the most provocative. The film posits a love triangle linking the black Antonio (a provincial service-station attendant), the ambitious mulata Teresinha, and the wealthy white woman Clarisse. Antonio ultimately loses both women when Teresinha departs for Rio with Clarisse. The racial schematism of the plot suggests a social allegory, confirmed by Antonio Pitanga in interviews, in which a woman who takes advantage of what Carl Degler calls the "mulatto escape hatch" conspires with a wealthy white to oppress poor blacks like Antonio. But while Pitanga's film suggests that the anomalies of Brazilian racism make mulattoes the enemies of blacks, other black-directed films, such as those of Onofre and Lopes, evoke a possible alliance between black men and women as being analogously oppressed, an alliance that remains problematic to the extent that "women" tends to mean "white women," while black women are left on the margins,

doubly oppressed as blacks and as women, with no allies at all.

The seventies also reveal a startling transformation in the attitude of white directors toward Afro-Brazilian culture. Whereas sixties Cinema Novo films tended to ignore or deny the legitimacy of Afro-Brazilian culture, many of the films of the seventies make of that culture the source of all that is most vital in Brazilian life. Dos Santos's *Amuleto de Ogum* (Ogum's Amulet, 1975), for example, celebrates the syncretic Afro-Brazilian religion called *umbanda*. Brazil's fastest-growing religion, *umbanda* combines Afro-Brazilian elements—the *orixas*, the centrality of spirit possession—with Catholicism, Cabala, and the spiritism of Allan Kardec. *Umbanda* is often said to be the Brazilian religion in that it incorporates elements from the major races constitutive of Brazilian identity. Dos Santos here aims to be "popular" not only in his choice of subject matter but also in perspective, discarding all vestiges of superiority and whole-heartedly affirming the values of the milieu depicted and the spectators to whom he hopes to appeal. Dos Santos virtually *re-*



OGUM'S AMULET: Gabriel (Ney Sant'ana) with the authentic umbanda priest (Pai Erley)



Juarez Paraiso as Pedro Arcanjo in TENT OF MIRACLES

quires the spectator to become an *umbandista*, at least for the duration of the film, if only in order to understand the narrated events. The film simply assumes *umbandista* values, without explaining them to the uninitiated. A Catholic audience, the director points out, need only see a priest raising the host to know a mass is being celebrated. An *umbandista* audience, similarly, recognizes the ceremony which “closes” the protagonist’s body, recognizes his protection by Ogum, the warrior divinity and symbol, in Brazil, of the struggle for justice. It recognizes the voice of the *preto velho* (the old slave who possesses mediums of all colors) and the provocative manners of the *pomba-gira* (evil in the form of woman). At the same time, the film does not idealize *umbanda*: one *umbanda* priest in the film works for popular liberation; the other is a greedy charlatan and opportunist.

Amuleto’s endorsement of *umbanda* did not go unchallenged. Some argued that the director’s uncritical stance constituted an abdication of intellectual responsibility. Dos Santos answered that the same intellectuals who laud “popular culture” often despise its most expressive forms such as religion. Religious purists, meanwhile, argued that *umbanda* itself constituted an illegitimate whitening of *candomblé*. In its defiant Brazilian-ness, they argued, *umbanda* turned its back on Mother Africa. While *candomblé* is communal, *umbanda* is individualistic and therapeutic, “the poor man’s couch.” Without taking a position on this convoluted debate, we can affirm that *Amuleto* accords respectful treatment to an Africanized, if not purely African,

religion, while showing the multi-racial participation in that religion. The film is indeed “popular” in the deepest sense of that word.

The same director’s *Tenda dos Milagres* (Tent of Miracles, 1976), meanwhile, debunks certain racial myths while perpetuating others. Here the black culture-hero Pedro Arcanjo (a composite figure based on a number of self-taught black intellectuals from Bahia) defends the Afro-Brazilian spiritual inheritance first against the fashionably racist and “scientific” theories of Professor Nilo Argilo and then against the clubs and guns of the police. Deployed across two time-frames, *Tent of Miracles* suggests that the ideologically explicit and politically violent racism of the past has merely transmuted itself into the subtler racism of the contemporary mass-media. In this sense, the film discredits the myth of “racial democracy.” On the other, it promotes the notion of miscegenation as social panacea. And the film’s generational progression from black Pedro to his mulatto son Tadeu and his white bride Lou suggests a parable of whitening as “progress,” an idea whose implicit racism has been denounced by Abdias de Nascimento and Muniz Sodré among others.

Much of the literature on blacks in North American cinema revolves around the existence of specific stereotypes: lazy Samboes, servile Toms, obese mammies, libidinous bucks, and tragic mulattoes. The temptation, for North American critics, is to look for these same stereotypes in Brazilian cinema. But while there are analogies between the *mãe preta* and the “mammy,” between Pai João and

Uncle Tom, it would be simplistic and misleading to stretch any of these analogies too far. It would be tempting, for example, to see the black Macunaíma, whose favorite expression is “Ai que preguiça!” (literally, “What laziness!”), as a Brazilian version of Stepin Fetchit, the archetypal “coon” of the thirties. But such an interpretation would scarcely do justice to the character or the film. Macunaíma is a multiple, contradictory character, who is by turns stupid, brilliant, lazy, and enterprising. These qualities are not correlated with race; the white Macunaíma displays the same diversity, and the same fondness for the expression “Que preguiça!” We can conclude that Mario de Andrade the writer and Joaquim Pedro the film-maker are caricaturing what they see as an occasional Brazilian trait common to all races. A more sophisticated methodology would also beware of “genre mistakes.” A search for “positive images” in the culturally coded carnival of *Macunaíma* would be fundamentally misguided. Both film and novel belong to a carnivalesque parodic genre which animates not rounded three-dimensional characters but rather two-dimensional “grotesques.” Virtually all the characters, white, black and mulatto, exhibit elements of the grotesque. Indeed, the film’s most archly grotesque characters are Pietro-Pietra, the white industrialist-cannibal, and his ghoulish spouse.

Take, as another example, the figure of the “tragic mulatto.” Certain characters—Tonio in *Bahia de Todos os Santos*, Jorge in *Compasso de Espera*—would seem to recall the tragic mulatto figure common in North American cinema and literature. The context, however, is radically different. North American society, for historical reasons, has tended to divide along clear racial lines. The North American vision inclines toward binarism: white or black. The Brazilian system is more complex; its spectrum nuances shades from *preto retinto* (dark black) through *mulato escuro* (dark mulatto) and *mulato claro* (light mulatto) through *moreno* and *branco de Bahia* (Bahia-style white). Brazilian racism consists not in a binary white-over-black but rather in the superimposition of an official integrationist ideology (“racial democracy”) on a reality pervaded by a subtle prejudice that white is better. (This prejudice is visualized on the 500 Cruzeiro bill, which shows a frieze of five

faces “progressing” from a clearly black face in profile on the left to a full-front light mestiço on the right). Brazil has never been a segregated society; its racism operates within a kind of intimacy and in this sense it resembles sexism more than North American racism. The racism of Brazil is not the virulent hatred of southern or northern rednecks but rather the quiet paternalism of role stereotyping. The notion of “passing for white,” so crucial in films like *Pinky* and *Imitation of Life*, has little relevance in Brazil, where it is often said with a laugh that all Brazilian families have “one foot in the kitchen,” i.e., that they all have a black ancestor somewhere in the family, a point comically demonstrated in *Tent of Miracles* when Pedro Arcanjo reveals his racist enemy Nilo Argilo, the rabid critic of “mongrelization,” to be himself part black.

An ethnocentric vision based on North-American cultural patterns often leads to the “racializing” of situations that Brazilians would not see as racially connoted. The millennial cult-leader Sebastião in *Black God, White Devil* (1964), for example, is played by the black actor Lídio Silva. The historical prototype for the role was not black; Rocha chose Silva for his imposing physiognomy and his style of acting. Nor does the film ever call attention to race. Yet, the American translation of the Portuguese title racializes the film. The Portuguese reads *Deus e Diabo na Terra do Sol*—God and the Devil in the Land of the Sun—while the American *Black God, White Devil* lends a racial connotation not present in the original title or in the film.

Since blacks, except as actors, have had a minimal role in the actual scripting, directing and producing of Brazilian films, they have tended to be pawns in a chess game controlled by others: black souls as white man’s artifact. Cinema Novo film-makers, even when speaking of *favela* and *sertão*, often seem to be really talking about themselves, projecting onto black characters like Firmino in *Barra-vento* or Jorge in *Compasso de Espera*, superficially different from themselves, their own situation as white middle-class intellectuals in a highly stratified society. What is clear is that many white film-makers have *wanted* to portray Afro-Brazilian culture sympathetically. Antonio Carlos Fontoura’s *Cordão de Ouro* (Golden Cord, 1977), Iberé Cavalcanti’s *Força*



GOD AND THE DEVIL IN THE LAND OF THE SUN

de Xango (Xango's Power, 1979) and Vera de Figueiredo's *Samba de Criação do Mundo* (Samba of the Creation of the World, 1979), for example, are all white-directed tributes to the power and beauty of Afro-Brazilian culture. But some of these tributes provoked resentment among black Brazilians. *Xica da Silva* was criticized for its portrayal of black woman as sex object, and *Tent of Miracles* was censured for its "parable of whitening." But the hostility was by no means universal in the black community. Blacks, whites and mulattoes "voted with their feet" for *Xica* by attending the film in droves and by dancing in the aisles of the movie theaters. And Lelia Gonzales, a leading spokesperson for both feminism and black liberation, dismissed the attack on *Xica* as puritanical, arguing that *Xica* was in some ways a very black film, a hymn to the vitality of black culture.

Only in the seventies do we have a body of films by black film-makers to compare to the larger corpus of films by white film-makers. But the evidence here is ambiguous. The black directors, quite unmilitant, seem content to portray black characters simply as people like other people without making larger polit-

ical points. The aggressivity of *Na Boca do Mundo*, an apparent exception to this rule, is directed more at what is seen as mulatto treason than at white oppression. The other constant of the black-directed films, apart from an auteurist interest in personal expression, is a tendency to articulate racial and political questions together with sexual ones. Although Brazil never knew the white sexual paranoia—analyzed by Calvin Herndon in *Sex and Racism*—that North America projected onto the black man, the repeated references in these films to white male hostility to black or mulatto sexual relations with white women suggests that the quotient of white neurosis might be higher than at first appears.

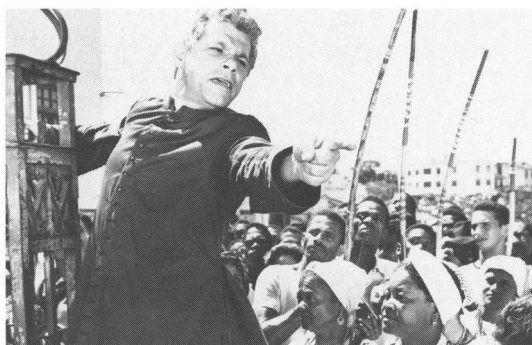
Much of the literature on race relations in Brazil (Bastide, Cardoso, Fernandes, Degler, Harris, Hasenbelg) focuses on the interarticulation of race and class. The films of the early sixties, following the line of the orthodox Communist Party-led left, tend to subordinate race to class. *Cinco Vezes Favela* (Five Times Favela, 1962), sponsored by the leftist Centers for Popular Culture, in some ways typifies the political approach of these films. Each of the five shorts composing the film makes a clear didactic point: that *favelados*



Workers confront boss in Leon Hirszman's episode of CINCO VEZES FAVELA

steal out of economic necessity ("Um Favelado"); that *favelados* are homeless because of exploitative landlords ("Zé da Cachorra"); that *favelados* should abandon the escapism of samba for serious political organizing ("Escola de Samba, Alegria de Viver"). Designed to illustrate the progressive ideas of white middle-class intellectuals, the films show a real reluctance to confront the specifically racial dimension of oppression, to see that racism is not only a kind of salt rubbed into the wounds of class but also a wound in itself. The films of the seventies, as we have seen with *Compasso de Espera* and *Na Boca do Mundo*, dare to pose the question of racism. Rather than subordinate race to class, some of the films articulate the two together. The repression of *candomblé* in *Tent of Miracles*, for example, is intricately linked to political and economic oppression. The black labor-union activist (Milton Gonçalves) martyred in Leon Hirszman's *Eles Não Usam Black Tie* (They Don't Use Black Tie, 1981), is murdered because he is an activist, but his killers also say "Get the black guy" before they shoot.

The most striking change between the sixties and the seventies lies in a changed attitude toward Afro-Brazilian culture generally and Afro-Brazilian religion specifically. The Cinema Novo directors of the early sixties tended to see Afro-Brazilian religion as alienated and marginal, something to be tolerated or reformed by well-meaning leftists. In *The Given Word*, *candomblé* is marginal to the mainstream practice of the Catholic Church. In *Barravento*, it is the partial cause of the people's alienation, that which keeps their eyes focused on



O PAGADOR DE PROMESSAS

heaven rather than on oppression here on earth. The attitude in the seventies is quite different. Black culture, once considered marginal, becomes the vital source of the powerful originality of Brazilian culture. Religion, no longer the opium of the people, becomes the scene of struggle and the locus of resistance to imperialist hegemony.

Many Brazilian films evoke political and social conflict through the manipulation of cultural expression, and Afro-Brazilian music is crucial in this regard. *The Given Word*, for example, sets in motion a cultural battle between *berimbau* (an instrument consisting of a long bow, gourd, and string) and church bell, which synecdochically encapsulates the larger struggle of *candomblé* and Catholic Church. *Tent of Miracles* counterpoints opera and samba to metaphorize the larger conflict between Bahia's white elite and its subjugated *mestiços*, between ruling-class science and popular culture. Rocha's *Terra em Transe* (Land in Trance, 1967) uses *candomblé* music to evoke the trance of the title, while inverting its conventional associations to suggest that the truly superstitious, those "in trance," are not the impoverished black practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religion but rather the mystical power-mongers of the white political elite. Rocha also associates the opera of Verdi and Carlos Gomes with the rightist Porfirio Diaz, samba with the populist Vieira, and the music of Villa-Lobos, the erudite elaborator of popular themes, with the anguished and divided protagonist Paulo Martins who, like Villa-Lobos and Rocha himself, gives sophisticated expression to the forces of popular culture.⁶

This circulation of popular and erudite culture is constant in Brazilian cinema. The stories of both *Xica da Silva* and the more



XICA DA SILVA

recent and in some ways similar *Xico Rei* by Walter Lima, Jr. were first presented as samba school “allegories” for Rio’s Carnival. Indeed, Carlos Diegues called *Xica* a “samba-enredo” —a film analogous to the collection of songs, dances, costumes, and lyrics that form part of that folk opera called a samba school presentation. The *favelados* of *Ladrões de Cinema* (the title, *Cinema Thieves*, alludes to De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves*), meanwhile, steal film-making equipment from American tourists at Rio’s Carnival, and conceive the film they plan to make as a kind of samba school narration of a famous episode in Brazilian history. At times, the film-makers’ tributes to popular culture are reciprocated in the form of popular-culture hommages to the film-makers. The death of Glauber Rocha, for example, was commemorated in the popular “cord literature” of the Northeast (the same literature which inspired the narrative strategies of both *Black God, White Devil* and *Antonio das Mortes*) in the form of a poem which eulogized him as the “cineaste who gave his life for his country.” And a Rio samba school is currently preparing a narrative-musical-dance tribute to Rocha for the 1983 Carnival.

A striking feature that would seem to separate Brazilian from North American culture is the extent to which the former is highly and *consciously* Africanized (I emphasize the “consciously” because North America has not yet become fully aware of the degree to which it too has been changed by the cultural contribution of Afro-Americans). Brazilians do not speak *Portugues*, argues Lelia Gonza-

les, they speak *Pretogues* (blackoguese) because African sounds and speech rhythms so strongly imbue their speech as to radically differentiate it from continental Portuguese. The most highly prized symbols of Brazilian nationhood are black. The national dish is *feijoada*, soul food created by blacks in the days of slavery. The national music is the samba, whose unmistakably African polyrhythms set all of Brazil dancing. The real Brazil, white, mulatto and black Brazilians will tell you, is in Bahia, the most Afrocentric metropolis in Brazil. Afro-Brazilian religion is now perfectly respectable and even fashionable among the elite. And in the privileged moments of Brazilian life, in carnival, for example, Brazil celebrates its own blackness.

Yet these cultural victories often mask political defeats. The process is clear in *Xica da Silva*. In this historical comedy, the eighteenth-century slave Xica becomes mistress to the richest man on the Brazilian diamond frontier. Although she briefly lives like a fantasy princess, with her own palace and servants, she is ultimately divested of her power. The Afro-Brazilian culture she intermittently embodies wins consistent victories: samba is shown as more vital than European classical music, spicy Afro-Brazilian cuisine overpowers the pallid representative of Portuguese colonialism, and Afro-Brazilian dance and energy far outshine Portuguese cultural expression. (If I was racist, says Carlos Diegues, I was racist with the whites.) Yet the carnivalesque inversions of *Xica da Silva* simultaneously reveal and mask a political and cultural problem. If Brazil’s soul is black, its persona is often white. More importantly, the many

homages to Afro-Brazilian culture in the films of the seventies are projected into a social conjuncture in which blacks are excluded from the centers of decision. And *this* situation will change only when the respect currently being accorded to Afro-Brazilian *culture* is matched by a real change in the social situation of Afro-Brazilian *citizens*, a change which would necessarily involve a radical redistribution of that substance vital to the life of any community—political power.

NOTES

1. I would like, first of all, to thank New York University for awarding me the Presidential Fellowship which provided the time and financial support in the Spring of 1981 to do the research for this article.

When I began research into this subject there had been no in-depth analysis of the black presence in Brazilian Cinema. The image of blacks in North American cinema had been explored, first in the pioneering essays of Albert Johnson in the late fifties and later in book-length studies such as Thomas Cripp's *Slow Fade to Black*, Daniel Leab's *From Sambo to Superspade*, and Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*. In Brazil, a recent issue of *Filme Cultura* (August-October 1982) includes a series of articles and interviews on the subject, with articles by José Carlos Avellar, Ismail Xavier and Jean-Claude Bernardet and interviews with Grande Otelo, José Carlos Burle, Ruth de Souza, Léa Garcia, Carlos Diegues, Antonio Pitanga, Zózimo Balbul, Zezé Motta, Odilon Lopes, and Walter Lima, Jr.

2. A 1976 TV commercial carried a very similar message via a very similar image. An off-screen voice announces: "In the imperial era of Brazil, transport looked like this": the image shows a blonde woman being carried on a litter by two slaves. Then the voice again: "Today, however, it's possible to enjoy the comfort of an LTD Galaxy, thanks to the services of Itaperá." We then see the same blonde woman, in the back seat of a car driven by a black chauffeur. The actor is the same man who played the slave in the previous shot. The slave has become a servant, in a movement paralleling the overall trajectory of *João Negrinho*.

3. Bosley Crowther, in his *New York Times* review of *The Given Word*, gave remarkably inaccurate and ethnocentric accounts of certain scenes. According to Crowther, "A swarm of pagan dancers stage a stomping swirling riot" and "Negroes and Indians come on and crowd the stage with wiggle dancing and the music of drums and guitars." Apart from the fact that there are no guitars in sight, the "wiggle dancing" is usually referred to as "samba," and the bestial "swarm" of Negroes and Indians, who are not in fact so easily distinguishable as Crowther suggests, is simply an ethnically mixed group of Brazilians enjoying themselves in the carnivalesque fashion common in Salvador.

4. See Ismail Xavier, *A Narração Contraditória*, a thesis presented to the University of São Paulo in 1979.

5. For a detailed analysis of these sequences, and of the film as a whole, see Randal Johnson's "Cinema Novo and Cannibalism: *Macunaima*," in Randal Johnson and Robert Stam, *Brazilian Cinema* (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1982).

6. Brazilian films also use Afro-American music for ironic commentary. In *Devil Queen*, the Godfather of Soul's "Sex Machine" exhorts the depressed protagonist to "get on up." Earlier in the film, the silky voice of Nat King Cole singing "They Tried to Tell Us We're Too Young" coincides with a gangland encounter of transvestites. In *Tent of Miracles*, a discussion of racial and political oppression in Bahia, we hear Jimmy Cliff singing "I Want to be Free." And in Ana Carolina's *Sea of Roses*, the sounds of Stevie Wonder's "Isn't She Lovely" are ironically superimposed on the obnoxious pranks of an adolescent girl.



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